

## Chapter 2

# Illustrating Humor: Political Cartoons on Late Qing Constitutionalism

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**Abstract** This chapter analyzes political cartoons relating to late Qing constitutionalism, a pivotal political campaign during the last decade of the empire. Through the reform movement, the Qing court, along with the populace, was attempting to strengthen the nation and “catch up” with foreign powers. The chapter will first look at how late Qing newspapers related political cartoons to the Chinese tradition of political humor and how Chinese cartoonists displayed their wit and humor in their satiric depiction of the constitutional movement, including the constitutional mission and the parliamentary petition campaign. Finally, the government’s reaction toward the cartoons will be examined through the analysis of newspaper reports of the day. This chapter argues that late-Qing political cartoons functioned as a crucial medium for representing Chinese political humor in visual form. These images, by drawing on the absurdity inherent in certain political issues, wield satire as a weapon against the government.

## 2.1 Introduction

China has a long tradition of political humor. Humor has been used as a rhetorical device to comment on political affairs since as early as the Western Zhou Period 西周 (1046–771 B.C.). The *Classics of Poetry* (Shijing 詩經) collects humorous examples of folklore and ballads which point to the tyranny of the government and the suffering of the people. *The Records of the Grand Historian* (Shiji 史記) also describes many court jesters who used witty language and comic performance as an oblique way to admonish the emperor.<sup>1</sup> Chinese literature has inherited this

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<sup>1</sup>Besides *The Records of the Grand Historian*, a number of history books and pre-Qing scholars’ monographs, too, contain comical and satirical writings with political themes. This shows that Chinese political humor was not limited to certain fields and books but was a common practice in the early time.

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tradition insomuch as comic elements can often be found in texts with political themes (Tang 1992; Qi and Chen 1995).

Despite the abundance of written examples, pictorial representations are relatively rare. It has been argued that it was not until the late Qing that comical scenarios were largely rendered in a pictorial form in China. The turn of the twentieth century was an era of intense political activities in China which coincided with the introduction of Western-style newspapers that enjoyed instant and widespread popularity. The political turbulence provided cartoonists with abundant source materials and newspapers offered them a platform. They published a great number of cartoons reflecting and commenting upon contemporary social and political affairs.

This rapid boom in cartoons at the turn of the century has drawn the attention of many scholars. This period is defined in most studies as the embryonic phase of Chinese cartoons and most scholarship focuses on the association between cartoons and images of funny figures in real life in pre-modern and ancient China, explores the mechanisms by which cartoons were published and examines how cartoons lampooned the political events and social problems of the era (Bi and Huang 1986; Gan 2008; Li 1978; Liu 2004; Han 2012; Chen 2015). Previous research outlines the development of cartoons, emphasizing their political significance in a general sense. Missing from this is a detailed investigation into the cartoons produced in response to a specific political issue. These images, published more or less on a daily basis, not only have value as a source of information on current affairs, but, more importantly, they serve as potential political weapons against the government. A thorough analysis is thus required, in order to grasp the nuances of how humor is deployed in images to make political points.

Accordingly, this chapter probes the fad of political cartoons by exploring images that comment on late Qing's constitutionalism, a crucial political issue in the last decade of the Qing dynasty. By means of the reform movement, the Qing court along with the populace was at the time attempting to strengthen the nation and "catch up" with foreign powers. Instead of cursorily applying the current definition of either comics or caricatures, my analysis will, first, try to define the cartoons within the context in which they were produced by scrutinizing the diverse range of names by which they were referred to. It will then look into how constitutionalism is depicted in different incarnations, including the constitutional mission and the parliamentary petition campaign, amongst others. Finally, it will assess the government's reaction toward the cartoons by analyzing newspaper reports in the wake of the publication of "Picture of Dogs' Gathering" in *Public Opinion Daily* in Beijing.

I mainly examine *The National Herald* (Shenzhou ribao 神州日報, Shanghai, 1907–1927) and its supplementary illustrated newspapers. *The National Herald* was a crucial Chinese newspaper at the time and, most importantly, carried a number of political cartoons created by famous cartoonists such as Ma Xingchi 馬星馳 (1873–1934) and Shen Bochen 沈伯塵 (1889–1920) that were of good quality (Han 2012; Chen 2015). I also refer to the following visual sources: *Mirror of the People Pictorial* (*Renjing huabao* 人鏡畫報, Tianjin 1907) and cartoons

reprints that appear in two compendia: *Qingmo minchu baokan tuhua jicheng* 清末民初報刊圖畫集成 (Guojiatushuguanfenguan 2003b) and *Qingmo minchu baokan tuhua jicheng xubian* 清末民初報刊圖畫集成續編 (Guojiatushuguanfenguan 2003a). Through scrutinizing these images, I argue that the cartoons produced in the newspapers at the turn of the twentieth century fit into the tradition of Chinese political humor. The images, by drawing the absurdity inherent in certain political issues, levy a satirical power against the government in visual form.

## 2.2 The Humor Tradition Visualized

Recent research tends to dub Chinese cartoons at the turn of the twentieth century as either “manhua” or “fengcihua”.<sup>2</sup> The term “manhua” 漫畫 was originally used to indicate illustrations in the newspapers in the late Qing; *Alarm Bell Daily* (Jingzhong ribao 警鐘日報) published three cartoons with the title “A Candid Depiction of Current Affairs” (shishimanhua 時事漫畫) in 1904. However, the term seldom appeared in newspapers (Gan 2008). It was not until Feng Zikai (豐子愷) published his drawings under the title “manhua” in 1925 that manhua became widely accepted as a genre in China (Gan 2008). Nowadays, “manhua” often denotes Japanese manga and comic strips. The term “fengcihua” 諷刺畫 was originally used to describe satirical illustrations in the late Qing but was later translated into “caricature” in the Republican era (Gan 2008).<sup>3</sup>

It might be anachronistic and misleading, however, to suggest that these were the only two terms for cartoons in the Chinese context. As a matter of fact, cartoons went under various names at the time (Bi and Huang 1986; Han 2012; Liu 2004); “manhua” and “fengcihua” were just two of them. Besides, to date, “manhua” and “fengcihua” have evolved into two different genres of visual art. When looking at cartoons dating from the era in question, scholars inevitably leave out those which do not conform to their genre definitions, or, conversely, seek out images dating back to archaic times without considering the context of the emergence of the cartoons.

For example, the authors of the three volumes of *A History of Cartoon in China* argue that cartoons have long been present in China by presenting various images which correlate with the contemporary definition of “manhua”. Yet, as Rea (2013) points out, Bi and Huang (1986) ignore how news illustrations influenced cartoons because the images were not “cartoon-like” enough. In addition, the authors’ criteria for selecting cartoons are not clear. Li (1978) discusses a wide range of mediums, including statues, murals and literati paintings in his definition and claims

<sup>2</sup>I would like to thank Christopher Rea for his valuable advice on both the content and language in the section.

<sup>3</sup>In 1935, Lu Xun 魯迅 (1881–1936) translated “manhua” into a German word *Karikatur* in his essay “On ‘manhua’ 漫談漫畫”, which is caricature in English.

that Chinese cartoons can be traced back to the legendary period of Fuxi 伏羲 (ca. before 2697 B.C.), a claim that Gan (2008) challenges.

In an attempt to place the cartoons of the late Qing in context, this chapter proposes a detailed examination of the names which have been variously used to refer to cartoons.<sup>4</sup> The multiplicity of names points to the range of functions and characteristics of cartoons such as contents and pictorial styles. Firstly, these names identify both the images and the accompanying captions and commentaries as satirical vehicles. “Comical words” (*huajizi* 滑稽字) and “satirical words” (*fengzi* 諷字) take characters as iconography, satirizing the subject of the cartoon by altering and distorting characters. Secondly, names like “contemporary picture” (*shihua* 時畫) and “sentimental picture” (*ganshihua* 感時畫) denote both the subject matter and are intended to provoke an emotional reaction. “Historical pictures” (*lishihua* 歷史畫) and “pictures of history” (*hua shi* 畫史) reveal a conscious attempt to use history to allude to a certain position on current affairs. Thirdly, the names indicate the importance of oblique forms of expression. “Allegorical pictures” (*yuyi hua* 寓意畫), “satirical pictures” (*fengci hua* 諷刺畫 or *fenghua* 諷畫), and “allegorical and satirical picture” (*fengyuhua* 諷喻畫) were especially popular (Shangwuyinshuguan 1979–1983). “Imaginative pictures” (*xianxianghua* 想像畫) advertised their fictionality while also preempting criticism, since the target of satire was ostensibly purely imaginary. Fourthly, names like “comical picture” (*huaji hua* 滑稽畫), and “laughable picture” (*xiaohua* 笑畫) indicate that the images are intended to be funny and risible (Shangwuyinshuguan 1979–1983). Fifthly, other names indicate that images were intended as commentary on contemporary events (*shiping* 時評), and that the illustrations—sometimes dubbed “picture criticism” (*huaping* 畫評)—were means to this end. Finally, captions like “cautionary picture” (*jinghua* 警畫) and “world-warning picture” (*jingshihua* 警世畫) indicate an intention to root out injustices and warn of present and coming dangers (Shangwuyinshuguan 1979–1983).

Among these names, “comical picture” (*huaji hua*) is used most commonly, which suggests the cartoons’ chief objective. Advertisements and the publication manifestoes that typically appeared in the first issue of a new publication also reinforced the humorous aim of the publication. For instance, in April 1912, *People’s Rights Illustrated* (*Minquan huabao* 民權畫報) announced that it would distinguish clearly between news illustrations and “comical pictures” and, therefore, added a pictorial column called “comical” (*huaji*).<sup>5</sup> Moreover, in the first issue of *Theater Illustrated* (*Tuhua jubao* 圖畫劇報, est. 1912), issued in Shanghai in the same year, the editors employed the term of “the comical picture”. They announced that they would distinguish “comical pictures” from new illustrations and

<sup>4</sup>In order to avoid causing confusion by using the term “comic” and “caricature”, the term “satirical picture” has been employed to refer to the name given to a work by the illustrators who produced it; whereas the term “cartoon” is used in referring to the genre of drawing.

<sup>5</sup>“Shubao gailiang guangkao 書報改良廣告” (The announcement for changing the page order), *People’s Rights Illustrated*, 19 April, 1912.

subdivided “comical pictures” into three categories by subject matter: national affairs (*guoshi* 國事), society (*shuhui* 社會), and the family (*jiating* 家庭).<sup>6</sup>

*Theater Illustrated* positioned national affairs first, implying that politics is the principal concern of “comical pictures”. The association of the comical with the political betrays the tradition of Chinese political humor and is explained more concisely in *The True Record* (Zhenxiang huabao 真相畫報). Its first issue in 1912 introduce seven kinds of images, including “comical pictures” (*huaqihua*). The text explains that criticism of imperial policy has long been held in high esteem by Chinese society, citing the “Biographies of Court Jesters” (*Guji liezhuan* 滑稽列傳) in the *Records of the Grand Historian* (*Shiji* 史記), which combines humor and moral admonitions of policy. Comical pictures, it argues, are intended to offer the same to readers. The very term “*huaji*” (archaic: “*guji*”) was drawn from the “Biographies of Court Jesters”, suggesting the images are intended to amuse the reader.<sup>7</sup>

In his *The age of irreverence: a new history of laughter in China*, Rea (2015) describes a significant phenomenon where a variety of humorous cultural products, such as funny images, comical essays, comedies, etc., have emerged from the late Qing to the Republican Era because of the rapid boom in newspapers and commercial need. Humor is able to increase a newspaper’s reach and this leads to the appearance of cartoons. These “comical pictures” inherit the tradition of Chinese political humor and are, no doubt, immediately deployed for political purposes. In the following sections, I will focus on the cartoons pertaining to late Qing constitutionalism, pointing to the general function of cartoons as both historical record and comical relief through exposing the absurdity at the core of political issues.

## 2.3 Constitutionalism: A National Farce

There has been considerable scholarship concerning late Qing constitutionalism. Much of it asserts that late Qing introduction of constitutionalism represents a breakthrough in Chinese history in that it is the first time that the government attempted to alter comprehensively the system of the government. The implementation of constitutionalism would go on to shake the foundation of Chinese despotism and reconfigure the power relationship between the populace and the government. However, it has also been argued that late Qing constitutionalism was simply a camouflage which allowed the court to maintain their despotism (Zarrow 2006; Meienberger 1980; Bian 2003; Chang 1971; Hou 2009; Jing 1987; Zhai 2011). These opposing views of the motives behind the introduction of

<sup>6</sup>“Benbao tongbao 1 本報通告1” (Announcement 1 by our periodical), *Theater Illustrated*, 9, November, 1912.

<sup>7</sup>“Benbao tuhua zhi tese 本報圖畫之特色” (distinguishing features of images in this periodical), *The Truth Record*, 1 (1912): n. p.

constitutionalism suggest the complexity of the huge political change on a national scale (Chang 1986; Zarrow 2006; Zhai 2011). Scholarship on the introduction of constitutionalism in the late Qing era has thus far explored a great deal of textual materials but very few pictorial materials, such as cartoons. The rise in the status of cartoons as historical resources suggests that the importance of turn-of-the-century cartoons should not be overlooked (Chen and Xia 2015; Scully and Quartly 2009).<sup>8</sup> The arguments positing that Chinese newspapers plays a crucial role in promoting constitutionalism in the social sphere points to the need for the study of the cartoons appearing in these newspapers (Li 2013).<sup>9</sup> As works of “contemporary picture” (*shihua* 時畫), the images aim to record the current affairs of the day, while the “commentary on contemporary events” (*shiping* 時評) provides a lens through which the reader can view certain political issues and events, with the addition of a humorous twist, highlighting the grotesqueness and the absurdity inherent in them. This chapter will investigate how cartoons delineate constitutionalism by exploring three representative political issues: the constitutional mission, the parliamentary petition campaign and the 9-year program to establish a parliament.

### 2.3.1 *The Constitutional Mission: An Awkward China*

After China’s “national humiliations” that were the expedition of the Eight Nation Alliance in 1900 and the Boxer Protocol in 1901, the Qing court finally recognized its tenuous status and decided to initiate a series of reforms. The age of the New Policies (新政) seemingly pulled the middle Kingdom back from its disastrous defeat and brought vitality to it once again. Constitutionalism, among all of the new policies, was highly anticipated. Numerous intellectuals and officials in favor of the

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<sup>8</sup>Chinese and Western scholars have noted the significance of images as historical sources. Chinese scholar Chen Pingyuan, in his study on *Dianshizhai huabao*, proposed reading history through images. He points out that reading texts accompanying images is a Chinese academic tradition which has been long ignored. He regards the illustrations in Chinese pictorials as historical sources, as implied in the term “Painting History” (畫史) given to describe the illustrations by Zheng Zhenduo 鄭振鐸, an important scholar of the early twentieth century. Likewise, Scully and Quartly state that the cartoon has played an important role in the representation of history in the West for centuries. After the publication and circulation of broadsheet newspapers, they became more significant and influenced the whole world. Although modern historians are beginning to acknowledge the importance of cartoons, Scully and Quartly have pointed to continuing shortcomings. The cartoon is often treated as “a kind of decoration”, to break up the text and give an impression of historicity, rather than to add to the historian’s argument”. The most “pernicious usage” is to casually deploy a single cartoon as “supporting evidence, without [engaging in a] reading of the artistic and cultural conventions shaping its content”. In contrast to written documents, “cartoons and other visual source[s] still escape critical analysis”.

<sup>9</sup>In *Baokan chuanmei yu qingmo lixian sichao*, Li thoroughly examines how newspapers helped develop and spread constitutionalist ideas in late Qing China. Although she explores the role of cartoons played in late Qing’s constitutionalism, her discussion of cartoons is still very short in length when compared to her discussion of textual sources.

political reform claimed that constitutionalism was a potent political trend in the twentieth century and that the war between nations was namely the war of different polities (Meienberger 1980; Hou 2009; Bian 2003). In 1905, the Russo-Japanese War seemed to confirm such a conviction. The defeat of the great power, Russia, by the small country, Japan, was attributed to the latter's successful launch of constitutionalism (Zhai 2011). The result was also taken as solid evidence that only constitutionalism would enable the East to surpass the West (Hou 2009; Zhai 2011).

The constitutional mission was the first key occurrence in this regard. In 1905, the court consented to send five senior officials overseas to investigate constitutionalism in several countries, including Japan, Germany, the United Kingdom, and America. On the eve of the commission, however, opponents to constitutionalism set off a bomb at the train station, wounding some officials and delaying the mission by a year. After completing the mission, the officials settled on Japan as the best paradigm for China and proclaimed constitutionalism as a fundamental national policy (Meienberger 1980; Zhai 2011).

A political change of such a scale inevitably aroused heated debates among senior officials, undermining the Qing court's resolution and ability to successfully implement the introduction of constitutionalism. In 1907, one year after the mission had been completed, constitutional government still seemed a distant goal. A sense of this frustration was reflected in several cartoons mocking the mission. Figure 2.1 shows a man wearing a Western-style suit showing slides of European scenery to a Qing official: "Look inside, there are so many foreign governmental offices and associations (衙門公所 yamen gongsuo)". The official, totally fixated with the images being presented to him, appears comically as a naif. The caption ridicules the constitutional mission, suggesting that it is no better than a slideshow by stating "Alas, none could enjoy such vivid scenery like this even traveling to Europe with a budget of one hundred and fifty thousand taels of silver (銀子)". Another cartoon in *Illustrated of the Year of Wushe* 戊申全年畫報 (Wushe quannian huabao) lampoons a constitutional commissioner (考察憲政大臣) by depicting him as a fisherman who nets the reflection of the moon, here symbolizing the foreign constitutions.<sup>10</sup> The cartoonist undertakes a depiction of the Chinese idiom: "to catch a moon in the water" (水中撈月), which, by extension, means to make impractical efforts to achieve a goal, to suggest the ineffectual nature of the constitutional mission.

The cartoon also points to the ideological divide between the constitutional commissioners and the constitutionalists. Zhai (2011) states that most of the commissioners devoted themselves to political reform and fought against the conservatives at court. They lobbied the court to reduce the 12 years of constitutional preparation to 9 years based on the German model and later reduced this further still, down to just 5 years. Another cartoon, titled "the effectiveness of the constitutional mission" (考察憲政之效果) (Fig. 2.2), points to the idea that contemporary constitutionalists were indignant at rather than grateful for the launch of

<sup>10</sup>Shishi Baoguan *Wushe Quannian huabao*, 1908. (no exact date given).



**Fig. 2.1** 'Investigation into constitutionalism.' *The National Herald*, October 7, 1908



this grand venture. After the promulgation of the 9-year program of constitution preparation, the constitutionalists were disappointed because they longed for immediate political change. This disappointment led them to criticize the commissioners for what they saw as procrastination in their mission. The cartoon depicts a parliamentary petitioner shooting an arrow at a target labeled “the aim of constitutionalism” (憲政的目的)<sup>11</sup> “from the bottom to the top”, but his attempt is blocked by a constitutional commissioner holding a shield, suggesting that the goal of establishing a constitution would never be reached.

The constitutional mission exhibited China's eagerness to follow international political trends, but, at the same time, exposed the awkwardness of its geopolitical status in the world. In the cartoon titled “The state of constitutionalism around the world” (世界憲政之現況) (Fig. 2.3), the cartoonist draws a humorous analogy between raising silkworms and implementing constitutionalism in order to depict China as lagging far behind other nations.<sup>12</sup> On a heap of dead wood are several

<sup>11</sup>A similar cartoon can be found in *Shenbao* in 1908. A man shoots an arrow at the target inscribed parliament but an officer stops it by clipping the arrow with a pair of pliers.

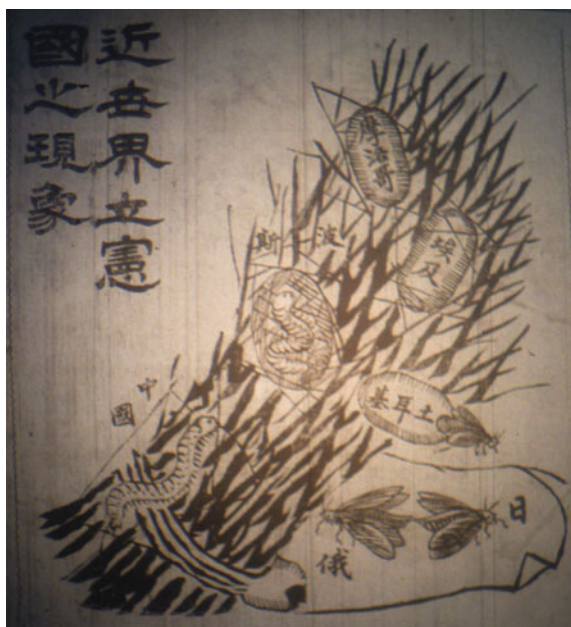
<sup>12</sup>‘The phenomenon of the constitutionalism in the world’, *The National Herald*, September 28, 1908.



**Fig. 2.2** 'The effect of investigating constitutionalism.' *The National Herald*, July 3, 1908



**Fig. 2.3** 'The state of constitutionalism around the world.' *The National Herald*, September 28, 1908



silkworms, silkworm cocoons and silkworm moths, which represent the status quo of the different nations in terms of their constitutional development. Persia is a silkworm making a cocoon, while Morocco and Egypt have advanced into their cocoon state. Turkey is shown as a silkworm moth wriggling out of its cocoon, while Japan and Russia—two adult silkworm moths—copulate with each other, which suggests the cartoonist is pointing to what he sees as the conspiracy between these two nations to encroach upon the territory in northeast China. Beside all these relatively progressive nations, China is portrayed as still a tiny wriggling silkworm, suggesting the long way still to go in its aim of catching up with the progress made by other nations.

### 2.3.2 *Parliamentary Petition: The Government in Grotesque*

The parliamentary petition campaign was also a crucial event in the pursuit of constitutionalism. From 1907 to 1911, constitutionalists urged the court to establish a parliament as soon as possible, which resulted in two petition campaigns. The first started in 1907. Its advocate, Yang Du 楊度 (1875–1931), a pivotal constitutionalist, initiated a parliament petition campaign by publishing essays in *Chinese New Times* (Zhongguo xinbao 中國新報). He was convinced that only a parliament could hasten the progress of constitutionalism, allowing people to participate in politics, to supervise the government, and to expel corrupt officials. The nationwide newspapers and constitutional associations supported his appeal, boosting the number of memorials to the court (Hou 2009).

In 1908, the petition eventually received a response. The court decreed a 9-year program for constitutional preparation mentioned above, which led immediately to considerable disputes (Hou 2009). Most of the constitutionalists deemed the 9 years to be too long, accepting it only reluctantly and turning their energy to establishing provincial consultative assemblies (諮議局). Yet the subsequent arguments with the court disappointed them once again; they realized that the only way to save the nation was to convene parliament. As a consequence of political tumult in 1909, there was a second wave of larger-scale petitions, with four such petitions in 1910 alone. The people from diverse social strata were involved in the campaign and demanded the immediate convocation of parliament (Hou 2009).

An abundance of cartoons appeared from 1907 to 1910 suggests the zealotry of the petitioners.<sup>13</sup> One cartoon renders the Chinese idiom “community of spirit and purpose will accomplish wonders” (眾志成城) visually to represent the popular

<sup>13</sup>‘Parliament,’ *Vernacular Picture Daily* 白話圖畫日報 (Baihua tuhua ribao), February 27, 1910; ‘Representatives of petitions’ *Vernacular Picture Daily*, February 20, 1910. ‘Parliament,’ *the National Herald*, July 1, 1910; ‘Bombastic politicians in power while good men are out,’ *the National Herald*, October 25, 1910; ‘Fruits fall off when ripe,’ *the National Herald* 瓜熟蒂落, October 29, 1910, just to name but a few.

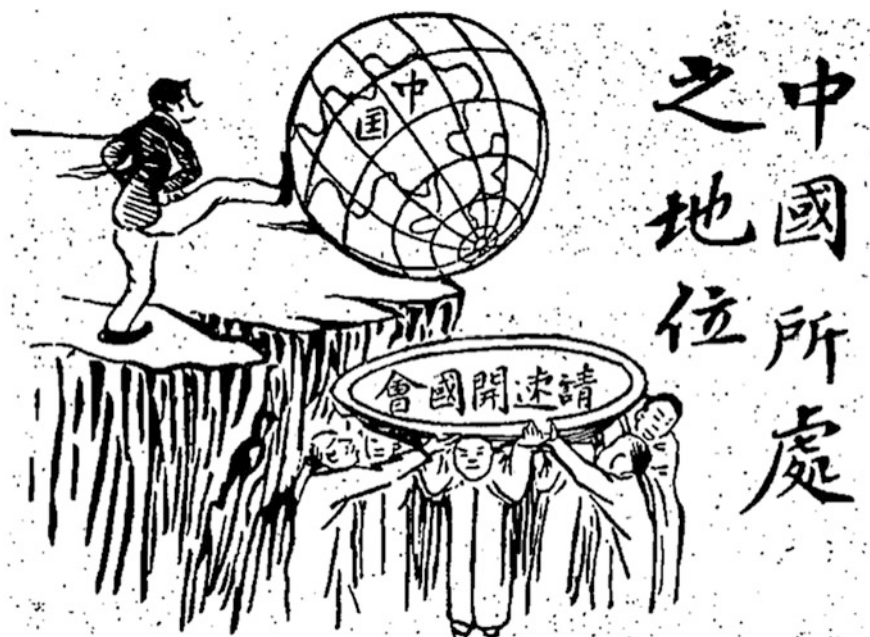


Fig. 2.4 'China's present status.' *The National Herald*, December 28, 1909

effort in 1910.<sup>14</sup> A group of people are pictured presenting the government with petitions, demonstrating their solidarity with constitutionalism. Similarly, the cartoon "China's present status" (中國的現狀) (Fig. 2.4) depicts a Westerner kicking a globe off a cliff. The future of China, the only country marked on the globe, is at stake, the cartoon suggests. To break the country's fall, a group of Chinese intellectuals hold out a huge tray which reads: "Please convene parliament as soon as possible" (請速開國會)!

As early as 1907, when the petition movement was just beginning, cartoons were already hinting at the difficulty of establishing a parliament. The representative institute would make the court redundant. One cartoon depicts the provincial consultative assemblies, part of the preparatory process of establishing a parliament, as a large tumor hanging on the face of the "aged and great Emperor" (老大帝國) (Fig. 2.5) which is often used as a symbol for China. He is trapped within a dark tree hollow signifying the sphere of foreign influence. The compelling peril, nonetheless, does not disturb him at all as suggested by his sound sleep. The provincial consultative assemblies, which were designed to wake up Old Man China, serve only as an ungainly growth on his body.

<sup>14</sup>'Community of spirit and purpose will accomplish wonders,' *The National Herald*, June 18, 1910.

**Fig. 2.5** 'Hopes of provincial consultative assemblies.' *The National Herald*, November 9, 1907



The cartoons suggest that the petitions were unlikely to succeed. One cartoon, for instance, depicts a man “drawing water with a wicker basket” (竹籃子打水), which is also a Chinese idiom, suggesting wasted effort.<sup>15</sup> The title “Hope for the petition” directly contradicts the image, which points to the huge gap between reality and the people’s expectations for parliament.

These cartoonists generally present exaggerated caricatures of officials to emphasize the court’s determined ignorance of the popular will. In one cartoon, for example, an official is depicted as a giant statue of Bodhisattva whom the petitioners worship.<sup>16</sup> The statue is made of mud, however, which, according to a Chinese proverb, implies that she is too weak to protect herself, let alone accomplish constitutionalism. In another example, the government is portrayed as the ruthless Yama Raja, the Chinese King of Hell (Fig. 2.6). He sends two little demon servants to meet a petitioner. Their names, “refusal” and “soliciting bribes”, are in opposition to the slogan on the king’s fan, “striving for reform” (力求改革)

<sup>15</sup> ‘A hope of the petition.’ *The National Herald*, July 4, 1910.

<sup>16</sup> ‘The muddy Bodhisattva.’ *The National Herald*, May 5, 1908.

**Fig. 2.6** 'Easy to see the master, hard to deal with small demons.' *The National Herald*, June 3, 1908

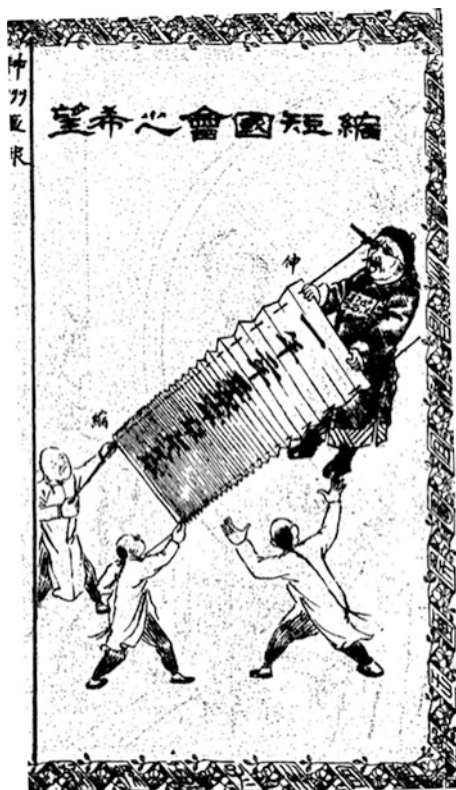


suggesting the duplicity of officials in shrouding their corrupt dealings with calls for reform.

### 2.3.3 *The Nine-Year Program: A Game of Numbers*

The cartoons lampooning the court's 9-year program go the furthest in demonstrating the wit and humor of cartoonists of this era. The images play on the number "nine", the stated number of years until parliament would be established, to unmask the absurdity and infeasibility of the court's plan. The cartoon, "A wish for parliament" (國會的希望), depicts a man climbing up to the parliament on top of a mountain.<sup>17</sup> His way is blocked by nine enormous knives which symbolize the various disasters and the internal troubles such as floods, droughts, typhoons, pestilence and so on. The last knife signifies "the ninth year" and is located just beside the houses of parliament. The man, with so many obstacles ahead, hesitates to take the first step. His plight suggests the 9-year program to be more of a calamity than an ideal.

<sup>17</sup>'A wish for parliament.' *Shenzhou wuri huabao* 神州五日畫報 (Shenzhou Five-Day Pictorial), September 6, 1909.



**Fig. 2.7** 'A desire for shortening the reparatory time of parliament.' *Shenzhou huanbao* 神州畫報 (Shenzhou Pictorial), December 9, 1909

Another cartoon with a similar title, "A desire for shortening the preparatory time for parliament" (縮短國會之希望), derides a terrified official who sticks to the 9-year program and neglects the popular voice (Fig. 2.7). The cartoonist reveals the tension between the people and the government by depicting the official edict folded into an accordion shape. The people and the official grasp opposite ends of the edict and the people endeavor to decrease the number of years by pushing the edict forward, while the officials attempt to increase the number of years by pulling on the edict to stretch it out. The two cartoons, though with the word "hope" in their titles, ironically illustrate that the 9-year program by no means brings any hope to the nation.

Besides domestic suffering, cartoonists also warned that the edict would not prevent a foreign invasion. In one cartoon, "Water afar quenches not fire" (遠水難救近火), a house on fire signifies the exacerbating foreign aggression in China





Fig. 2.8 'Surmise of the parliament.' *The National Herald*, November 3, 1910

(外患).<sup>18</sup> The Qing officials, recognized by their official garments and hats, hurry to extinguish the flames. To take water, they have to run towards a remote well that symbolizes the "nine-year parliament" (九年之國會). The distance between the house and the well is so far that only one official comes back to put out the fire. Others are still on their way to the well. The cartoonist, by adapting a Chinese proverb again, pokes fun at the 9-year program.

"Surmise of the parliament (國會的猜度)," published in November 1910, is a brilliant piece of satire on this theme (Fig. 2.8). The cartoonist depicts the court's procrastination over convoking the parliament as a game of dice. On the table are six panels indicating different years from the third year to the eighth year of the Xuantong 宣統 period (1911–1917). The standing official, after shaking the dice cup, demands that the gamblers make wagers on the outcome. The gamblers come from various social strata and point their fingers at different years. None of them has an accurate idea about when the parliament will be established. The cartoon lampoons constitutionalism as an indecent gamble at a national level and the banker is actually the Qing court. This 1910 cartoon could not have predicted that the Xuantong period would end in 2 years. "The surmise of the parliament" did not greet the opening of the parliament but, unexpectedly, welcomed a new republican regime in 1912.

In addition to satirical criticism, these images can also be seen as a form of encouragement. In 1910, the petition campaign finally saw some light at the end of the tunnel, as the Qing court determined to convene the parliament 3 years ahead of the original schedule. The news greatly encouraged both petitioners and cartoonists. On November 8, 1910, one cartoon depicted a house with a plaque inscribed with

<sup>18</sup> 'Water afar quenches not fire.' *The National Herald*, December 20, 1909.



the word “parliament” (國會) above the door.<sup>19</sup> A group of people are seen in the cartoon wearing happy smiles and carrying a tree trunk to ram at a door that signifies the “9 years”. Behind the door is another black door labeled “5 years”. The cartoonist encourages the populace to try harder to break the black door, as implied in the title “One step closer!” (更近一層), suggesting the Qing court could be cajoled into convening parliament much sooner.

Late Qing’s constitutionalism, as these cartoons suggest, was something of a national farce: the weak and helpless China on the world stage and the government serving as a laughing stock with the infeasible 9-year program being their slapstick performance. Alongside this, the cartoonists were also eager to reveal the comical workings behind the scenes. The following section examines a specific visual motif of “constitutionalism versus despotism” in order to examine how cartoons unearth the absurd (and irrational) core of late Qing’s constitutionalism and how it intertwined with despotism.

## 2.4 Constitutionalism: A Duplicate of Despotism

The opposition of constitutionalism and despotism provoked heated debate in the late Qing, namely, how despotism and constitutionalism functions in relation to one another. Within the court, senior officials who were of the belief that constitutionalism would destroy the Qing regime and Chinese tradition argued doggedly with the officials supporting constitutionalism in order to maintain the despotic status quo (Zhai 2011). In the newspapers, the public openly challenged the legitimacy of despotism and the feudal regality (Li 2013). Many cartoons of the time pointed out that despotism may have surreptitiously infiltrated the constitutional movement. For example, despotism could be either the fuel or the root of constitutionalism. The cartoon, “The constitutionalist lantern” (立憲燈), satirizes constitutionalism as being fueled by despotism.<sup>20</sup> In the lantern, nationals (國民) run after an official carrying a big round plate symbolizing the constitution. The lantern supposedly illuminates this dark country but this is revealed as an illusion, as it is actually lit by candles of despotism.

The cartoonists illustrate despotism as artfully hidden behind constitutionalism to deceive foreign powers and the domestic populace. Another cartoon compares late Qing politics to child’s play: two Chinese children wearing masks confront foreign children. One of them holds a mask with a sad countenance inscribed “constitutionalism”, under which is his real face with an odd smile, labeled “despotism”. What is hidden in Fig. 2.9 is something a little more deadly, however. It depicts an official who show a man the constitution. On the cover is written “preparation for constitutionalism” and “convene the parliament as soon as

<sup>19</sup>‘One step closer.’ *The National Herald*, November 8, 1910.

<sup>20</sup>‘A constitutionalist lantern.’ *The National Herald*, March 2, 1908.

**Fig. 2.9** ‘When the map was unrolled, the dagger was revealed.’ The National Herald, July 20, 1908



possible”. A huge knife is concealed within it, however, signifying despotism and the intent to cause injury to the people. This creates a visual representation of the Chinese idiom “Tu qiong bi jian (圖窮匕見)” (When the map was unrolled, the dagger was revealed), which describes the real intention mainly to be exposed in the end.

Qing’s constitutionalism is suggested to be a duplicate of despotism, meaning that the efforts of constitutionalists had been in vain. One Chinese proverb in particular was often used, “Yi yang hua hulu 依樣畫葫蘆” (Sketch the gourd according to the pattern) which means “acting after the same fashion”. As early as 1907, a cartoon in *Mirror of the People Pictorial* depicts a man writing two words “zhuanzhi 專制” (despotism) and “lixian 立憲” (constitutionalism) in the identical form of a gourd.<sup>21</sup> It mocks constitutionalism as just another form of despotism, rather than a political innovation (Huo 2004).<sup>22</sup> In 1909, the theme was expounded further with a humorous four-panel cartoon (Fig. 2.10). An official is depicted as a magician performing his “big magic trick” (Da bianfa 大變法): he puts a rock on

<sup>21</sup> ‘Sketch the gourd according to the pattern.’ *Renjing huabao*, December 15, 1907.

<sup>22</sup> A collection of the Qing’ cartoons, *Neizheng chunxiu* 內政春秋 (Annals of Domestic Affairs), contains a very similar cartoon. Though the cartoon’s publishing details are not given, but it should have appeared around the turn of the twentieth century according to its artistic style and political theme.

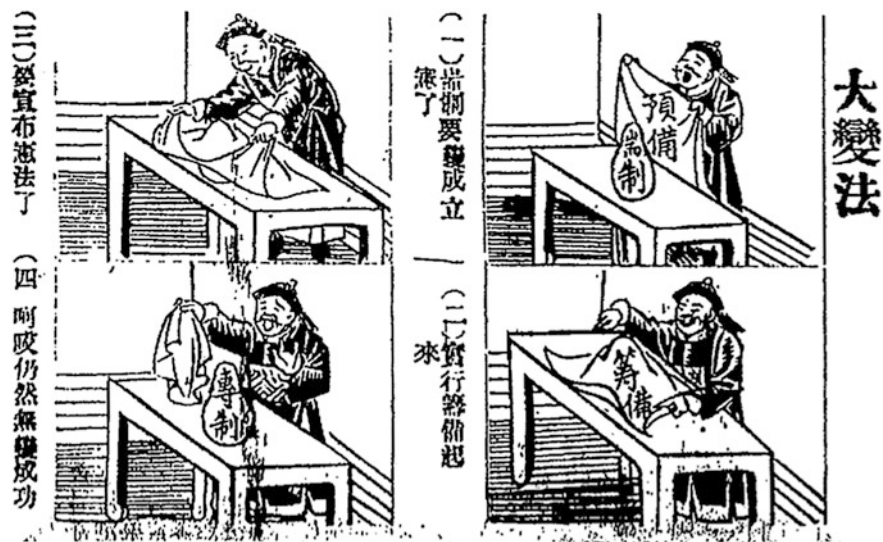


Fig. 2.10 'A great magic trick.' *The National Herald*, March 10, 1911

the table, covers it with a piece of clothing, then makes his big reveal, but the rock still looks the same. The cloth labeled constitutionalism effects no change to the rock labeled despotism. The cartoon plays with an equivocal. "Bianfa 變法" literally means a magic trick, but it is often used, by extension, to refer to political reforms. The failed magic trick, in effect, is a success for the Qing court, whose sincerity in their quest for political reform was always questionable. The smile of the official in the cartoon suggests that he, at least, was satisfied with the result of the magic show.

The previous sections have described how cartoons criticize the government's venality and hypocrisy. These images serve as a political weapon, but to what extent could they actually *wound* the government? Did the cartoons really influence politics? The cartoon "Picture of fighting dogs" published in the Beijing-based *Public Opinion Daily* (Gonglunshiba 公論實報) sheds some light for us in this regard.

## 2.5 Exerting Power: Council of Dogs

On January 6, 1911, Beijing's *Public Opinion Daily* published a political cartoon and a commentary satirizing the Consultative Council (資政院) and its members. The cartoon, "Picture of fighting dogs" (群狗競爭圖), and the commentary, "Dogs' speech" (狗說), denounce the council as a place where dogs gather and bark at each other for their own self-interest. Such "malicious libel" infuriated the council

members who demanded the local police department reprimand the newspaper; as a result, *Public Opinion Daily* was fined and suspended for 7 days. The writ of penalty resulted in extensive protest led by newspapers in the capital city and the police department reacted defiantly by increasing the penalty. On January 9, *Public Opinion Daily* was compelled to pay an additional fine and to cease publication for good (Fang 2000; Ma 2007; Zhao 2008).

Thus far, attempts to access *Public Opinion Daily* to see the cartoon, the commentary and related essays have been unsuccessful, but, fortunately, related reports and commentaries in other newspapers provide us with valuable clues as to how cartoons were able to wield political power. Although knowing little about the cartoons themselves, we do realize that politicians responded to them. They understood the underlying messages behind the images and were able to issue bans on publication. For that reason, their indignation and retaliation tended to be recorded in newspapers which carried the very commentaries mocking them. This back-and-forth process is a testimony to the efficacy of cartoons in the political sphere.

The ban on *Public Opinion Daily* immediately drew the attention of the newspapers outside Beijing (Zhao 2008).<sup>23</sup> *Shenbao* 申報, for example, an influential Shanghai-based newspaper with a nationwide circulation, published several articles on this issue. On January 14, 1911, a report depicted what was going on within the council. Yi Zongkui 易宗夔 (1874–1925) was the member who proposed penalizing the newspaper. He insisted that the cartoon was an insult to the council and even the nation in that it implied that the council members were dogs and, by extension, that China was a nation of dogs. Although he was opposed by another member, who saw the cartoon as merely attacking the government, Yi's proposal was passed with warm applause.<sup>24</sup>

A Shanghai revolutionary newspaper, *Independent People's Newspaper* (Minlibao 民立報), also aligned itself with the angry press. Its founder, Yu Youren 于右任 (1879–1964), a pivotal literati and press entrepreneur, published a piece of political satire under the pseudonym "Saixin 騷心". Yu ridiculed the court's publication ban listing the following reasons (Yu 1986).<sup>25</sup> Firstly, it is the council members who put themselves in such an awkward position. The cartoon was alleged to criticize the Qing court but the members insisted that they were the very target (Zhao 2008).<sup>26</sup> This led the editor to mock the members with the jibe that only dogs could recognize the same species, for they identified themselves with

<sup>23</sup>*Shengjing ribao* 盛京日報 in Fengtian 奉天, *Dagongbao* 大公報 in Tianjin 天津, and *Shenbao* 申報 and *Minlibao* 民立報 in Shanghai published reports or commentaries on the press ban on *Public Opinion Daily*.

<sup>24</sup>*Shenbao*, January 14, 1911.

<sup>25</sup>Saixin 騷心, Wuhu yiyuan san 嗚呼議員(三) (Alas, council members 3), *Minlibao*, January 11, 1911.

<sup>26</sup>According to the report in *Shengjing ribao* on January 12, 1911, *Gonglunshibao* defended itself against the accusation of the cartoon and the commentary as malicious labels by noting that it had often been seen in history books that dogs are used as a figure of speech; the police department,

dogs in the cartoon. Secondly, the members only seemed to care about which newspapers disrespected them rather than devoting themselves to urgent national affairs. The editor deemed it as a national catastrophe. Thirdly, banning newspapers was illegal. By way of a series of witticisms, the editor laid out a case for the cartoon as having nothing to do with the council or the nation. He interrogated the council members as on which legal provisions the order to the Ministry of Civil Affairs (民政局) to ban the newspaper was based. There were no such provisions. The council members' ignorance of the law, he emphasized, is the national shame.

On January 22, *Shenbao* carried a statement made by Yi Zongkui, in which he defended himself against the newspapers' accusation. The government announced that *Public Opinion Daily* was banned for detrimental moral influence and provoking social disorder which, as Yi explained, was far from his original intention. He, therefore, implored the council chair to lift the ban and investigate who drafted the governmental injunction. Yi's statement appears a sincere clarification, but the *Shenbao* editor gave it an ironic title "Is Yi Zongkui afraid to be satirized and chastised?" The title hints at a surge in criticism against the council; Yi, under such pressure of public opinion, shifted all of the blame on to others. His attempts to clarify did not have the desired effect, but rather turned him into a laughing stock, and his cowardice in the public arena was shown to contradict with his arrogance on the council.<sup>27</sup>

The commentary "How did council members become dogs?" published in *Shenbao* on February 6, 1911 derides the council members by sharing with readers tips on how to manipulate members. The author, at the beginning, expressed his anxiety about the future of *Public Opinion Daily*, for it criticized the government more fiercely than ever after resuming publication. According to one of his superiors' words, the author then inferred that the council members were like dogs, in that they did not attack those who fed them with meat and bones. Hence, he drew the conclusion that anyone who paid the members money monthly could make them obedient and silent, suggesting that the members had degraded into pets of the Qing court from which they received their allowance. The author, in the end, asked himself whether the members could bear his acrid mockery as if he were, or should be, worrying about his future as well from that moment on.<sup>28</sup>

The council members' irritation recalls the well-known words made in 1870s New York in reference to a political cartoon: "I don't care so much what the papers write about me. Most of my constituents can't read. But, damn it, they can see pictures" (Schneider 2007). It was allegedly made by William Tweed, the Tammany Hall politician, on seeing a cartoon depicting him as "a vulture picking over the bones of the New York City Treasury" (Duus 2001). The cartoon, created

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(Footnote 26 continued)

therefore, should not punish the newspaper for this. However, the explanation was not accepted but rather enraged the department.

<sup>27</sup>*Shenbao*, January 22, 1911.

<sup>28</sup>*Shenbao*, February 6, 1911.

by Thomas Nast, aimed at exposing Tweed's greed and corruption, which may have successfully put Tweed into jail in the end (Duus 2001). Back to 1911 China, the cartoon of "Picture of Fighting Dogs", while failing to send all council members to prison, underlined their ineptitude. The American culture scholar, Stefanie Schneider's analysis (2007) of Tweed's reaction to the cartoon, is analogous to the situation in the Far East: "a well-drawn, witty and fitting cartoon" can make the attack target emotional and fear its influence on the beholders.

## 2.6 Conclusion

This chapter examines the political humor of Chinese cartoons at the turn of the twentieth century. As the chapter argues, humor is the chief objective, reflected in the name "Huaji hua" (comical pictures). The cartoons on late Qing's constitutionalism demonstrate that cartoonists distill the crucial significance of political events and turn them into a wide array of visual metaphors, which are, to borrow a term from the art historian Gombrich, one of the weapons in "the cartoonists' armory." (1963). These images take on a simple and straight pictorial style, adapt Chinese idioms into the varied political contexts, and achieve a level of wit and humor. Mocking Qing officials and court constitutionalism, the cartoons expose the incongruity between the government's ostensive objective and practical actions, warning readers that late Qing's constitutionalism was essentially despotism in a new guise. The cartoons also wield substantial power, as suggested by the reaction against them, including the publication ban imposed on *Public Opinion Daily* in 1911. Be it indignation or fear, the council members' reaction to the image that compare them to dogs suggests the cartoon's political influence. In summation, the cartoons at the time inherit the tradition of Chinese political humor and highlight absurdities inherent in political issues, paving the way for the exuberance of political cartoons in the Republican Era.

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Not Just a Laughing Matter

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